

Israel's Stranglehold on America

by Chris Hedges via claire - Truthdig *Tuesday, Mar 12 2019, 10:44pm*

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The Israel lobby's buying off of nearly every senior politician in the United States, facilitated by our system of legalized bribery, is not an anti-Semitic trope. It is a fact. The lobby's campaign of vicious character assassination, smearing and blacklisting against those who defend Palestinian rights—including the Jewish historian Norman Finkelstein and university students, many of them Jewish, in organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine—is not an anti-Semitic trope. It is a fact. Twenty-four state governments' passage of Israel lobby-backed legislation requiring their workers and contractors, under threat of dismissal, to sign a pro-Israel oath and promise not to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement is not an anti-Semitic trope. It is a fact.

The shameless decision in 2014 by all 100 U.S. senators, including Bernie Sanders, to pass a Soviet-style plebiscite proposed by the Israel lobby to affirm Israel's "right to defend itself" during the 51 days it bombed and shelled homes, water treatment plants, power stations, hospitals and U.N. schools in Gaza, killing 2,251 Palestinians, including 551 children, is not an anti-Semitic trope. It is a fact. The U.S. refusal, including in the United Nations and other international bodies, to criticize Israel's apartheid state and routine violation of international law is not an anti-Semitic trope. It is a fact. The well-funded campaigns by the Israel lobby, which works closely with Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs, to discredit any American politician or academic who even slightly deviates from Israeli policy is not an anti-Semitic trope. It is a fact. (One infamous example of a U.S. politician kowtowing was the unconstitutional invitation by then-House Speaker John Boehner to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress in 2015 to denounce President Barack Obama's Iranian nuclear agreement.) The massive interference in our internal affairs by Israel and the Israel lobby, far exceeding that of any other country, including Russia or China, is not an anti-Semitic trope. It is a fact.

Israel's lackeys in the political class, along with bankrupt courtiers in the U.S. press, including former American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) employee Wolf Blitzer, are making a serious mistake, however, in refusing to acknowledge Israel's outsized, transparent and often illegal meddling in the American political system and Israel's brutal oppression of Palestinians. It is too obvious and too egregious to hide. The longer the ruling elites ignore this reality and censor and attack those such as Rep. Ilhan Omar who have the temerity to name this interference and the human rights abuses perpetrated by Israel, the more it gives credence to the racists, bigots, conspiracy theorists and white hate groups, many rooted in the Christian right, who are the real anti-Semites. Israel and its lobby, rather than protecting Israel and Jews, are steadily nullifying their moral and ultimately political force.

Criticism of Israel and the ideology of Zionism is not anti-Semitic. Criticism of Israel's influence and control over U.S. foreign policy, and of Israeli efforts to silence those who champion Palestinian rights, is not anti-Semitic. Criticism of Israel's oppression of the Palestinians or its dangerous campaign to orchestrate a war with Iran is not anti-Semitic. The more Israel and the Israel lobby abuse the charge of anti-Semitism, a charge the Israel lobby has leveled against British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, among many others, the more they lose their effectiveness against the

dangerous anti-Semites whose ranks are growing within the far right and across the Muslim world.

Israel and its lobby do not care if its political allies, including those in the Christian right and the Trump White House, possess warped and racist attitudes about Jews. The Christian right and many of those in the White House, while embracing Zionism, are also anti-Semitic. President Donald Trump has called neo-Nazis “very fine people” and once tweeted an illustration of Hillary Clinton against a background of hundred-dollar bills and with the Star of David superimposed near her face. The sole criterion of Israel and the Israel lobby in determining who to support and who to demonize is identifying who backs the far-right agenda of the apartheid state of Israel and who does not. Genuine anti-Semitism is irrelevant. For Israel, the world is divided along the fault line of Palestinian rights. Stand up for the Palestinians and you are an anti-Semite. Cheer their marginalization, oppression and murder and you are a friend of the Jews. Have Jewish leaders forgotten their own history? Anti-Semitism is wrong and dangerous not only because it is bad for the Jews, but because the dark forces of ethnic and religious hatred, used by Israel and the lobby against critics, are bad for everyone, including the Jews and the Palestinians. You open this Pandora’s box of evils at your peril.

The interference by Israel in the American political system is amply documented, including in the Al-Jazeera four-part series “The Lobby,” which Israel and its supporters managed to block from being broadcast. In the film, a pirated copy of which can be watched on the website Electronic Intifada, the leaders of the Israel lobby are repeatedly captured on a reporter’s hidden camera explaining how they, backed by the intelligence services within Israel, attack and silence American critics and use huge cash donations to control the American electoral process and political system. The Israel lobby, lacking any plausible deniability, has remained stunningly silent about the film. The corporate press, in the face of pressure by the lobby, has ignored the documentary.

The series exposes the various machinations of the Israel lobby.

“We made sure that there were people [agents of the lobby] in every single congressional district,” M.J. Rosenberg, a former editor of the AIPAC policy journal Near East Report and now a critic of AIPAC, said in the film in an on-the-record interview with Al-Jazeera. “You call [politicians] and say, ‘I’m calling from AIPAC in Washington.’ I did these calls. ‘We hear you’re good friends with Congressman So and So.’ ‘Oh my God, yes, we’ve been friends with so and so.’ ‘Well, what does he think about Israel?’ ‘I never talked to him about Israel.’ ‘Well, can I come down and talk to you? And help you figure out a way to talk to him about Israel?’ ‘No, just tell me. What should I say? I’ll just tell him.’ ”

Craig Holman, who campaigns for lobbying reform with Public Citizen, is another participant in the film who denounced the Israel lobby’s fundraising practices.

“Right now our current [federal] contribution limit from any person to a candidate is \$2,700,” Holman says. “That’s a lot of money. It can certainly buy ... some gratitude with a lawmaker. But if you really want to add punch to that type of buying of favors, what you do is you get 50 or 100 people together at an event like this, all chipping in \$2,700 and then you bundle it all together and hand the total amount to the lawmaker. At that point, we’re talking anywhere around a quarter-million dollars. So suddenly you’ve got a group of people with the same demand they want from the lawmaker, handing over a quarter of a million dollars. That buys a lawmaker.”

One of the fundraising events captured in the film was for Anthony Brown, a Democrat who successfully ran for Congress in Maryland in 2016.

"You strategically pick the ones who are in close races and [whom you] want to build relationships with," David Ochs, the founder of HaLev and an activist for Israel, says in the documentary. "We want the Jewish community to go face to face in this small environment—50, 30, 40 people, and say, 'This is what's important to us.' "

"They're actually buying these officeholders," Public Citizen's Holman says in the documentary. Speaking from the lobby's point of view, he says "we're chipping in all this money so we can hand over \$100,000 or \$200,000 to the officeholder so we can buy them."

"What [the] group is doing to avoid that [federal] disclosure requirement is it isn't taking money and putting it in its own account and then handing it over to the officeholder," Holman says of the Israel lobby. "It's just collecting credit card information and turning that over directly to the candidate. Therefore, it's not violating the earmarking law and they're not reporting this. All we can see on the campaign finance reports are the individuals who contributed. But there are no records on those campaign finance reports that they weren't together in a bundling group who are all at this event. All we'd know is Person A gave \$2,700; Person B gave \$2,700. And we'd have no idea they're working in tandem with each other."

The Israel lobby also flies hundreds of members of Congress, often with their families, to Israel every year for lavish junkets at expensive resorts. These Congress members run up individual bills that frequently exceed \$20,000. The Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 attempted to restrict lobbyists from offering paid trips lasting more than one day to members of Congress. But AIPAC, which has never been forced to register as a foreign agent, used its clout to insert a clause in the act to exclude so-called educational trips organized by charities that do not hire lobbyists. AIPAC is affiliated with such a charity, called the American Israel Education Foundation.

"It doesn't have an office," Holman says about the foundation. "It doesn't have any employees. It's just a tax form they [Israel lobby agents] file. Gives some dinners, gives some wonderful resorts to stay at, entertainment, all of which is packed up into one of these trips. It's a very, very effective tool at influence peddling."

The investment by Israel and its backers is worth it. The United States Congress in 2018 authorized a \$38 billion defense aid package for Israel over the next decade and has spent over \$5.6 trillion during the last 18 years fighting futile wars that Israel and its lobby pushed for in the Middle East.

"If you wander off the reservation and become critical of Israel, you not only will not get money, AIPAC will go to great lengths to find someone who will run against you," John Mearsheimer, professor of political science at the University of Chicago and co-author of "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," says in the documentary. "And they support that person very generously. The end result is you're likely to lose your seat in Congress."

The film focuses in part on former Rep. Jim Moran, who was in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1991 to 2015 and who was an open critic of the Israel lobby.

"They have questionnaires," Moran says about AIPAC in the film. "Anyone running for Congress is [presented with a demand from AIPAC] to fill out a questionnaire. And they evaluate the depth of your commitment to Israel on the basis of that questionnaire. And then you have an interview with local people. If you get AIPAC support, then more often than not you're going to win."

"You are told that 'Israel continues to be under siege from hundreds of millions of its neighbors who are Muslims and they hate Israel and Jewish people,' " Moran says. "You're told, 'They have only

survived because of the United States, because of American politicians like you who support us.' ”

“You realize it’s not just the money,” he goes on. “A number of concerned activists will send out postcards, make phone calls, they’ll organize. That’s the democratic process. They understand the democratic process.”

“They threaten,” M.J. Rosenberg says of the Israel lobby leaders’ response to elected officials who become critical of Israel. “They immediately threaten. Even if [politicians] know AIPAC can’t defeat them, AIPAC can make their lives more difficult. They can make sure that their next town meeting or something, some members of the Jewish congregation jump up and say, ‘But you’re anti-Israel!’ ”

Moran was targeted by the Israel lobby because he raised questions about the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force Act, which authorized the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Moran told a Jewish constituent at a town hall meeting in his district that “if the Jewish community was opposed to the war, I think that would make a difference” in whether the United States would invade Iraq. He was immediately accused by the Israel lobby of being an anti-Semite and fostering the belief that there was a Jewish conspiracy to push America into war.

“There was a conservative rabbi in my district who was assigned to me, I assume, by AIPAC,” Moran says. “He warned me that if I voiced my views about the Israeli lobby that my career would be over, and implied that it would be done through the [Washington] Post. Sure enough, The Washington Post editorialized brutally. Everyone ganged up.”

The film shows a screen shot of a 2003 headline in The Washington Post: “Sorry, Mr. Moran, You’re Not Fit For Public Office.” In following years there were a number of other negative commentaries.

In the film, Eric Gallagher, then with The Israel Project, tells the undercover reporter that AIPAC has a close relationship with the Washington Post editorial board.

Moran says, “The principal editorial board of the Post itself has been a very effective instrument because they have been able to maintain their credibility. It’s a great paper in every other way. Because they have such credibility, they’re extremely effective.”

“Both of my daughters married Jewish men,” Moran says. “My grandchildren are Jewish. Anybody who considers me an anti-Semite is ignorant.”

AIPAC, while it presents itself as an impartial supporter of Israel, has long been an arm of the Israeli right. It vehemently opposed the Oslo Accord and the peace process with the Palestinians engineered by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. It poured money and resources into the 1992 Israeli election campaign to back Rabin’s political opponents in the Likud party. Rabin did not invite the leaders of the Israel lobby to his inauguration and, according to an aide in his office, referred to the leaders of the Israel lobby as “scumbags.” He repeatedly denounced the lobby as an impediment to Israel’s security and democracy.

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz characterized Rabin’s remarks to American Jewish leaders during a visit to the United States as “brutal.” “You have hurt Israel,” the newspaper quoted Rabin as saying. “I will not allow you to conduct my dealings with the [U.S.] administration.”

Washington Jewish Week reported that Rabin told the AIPAC leadership, “You failed at everything. You waged lost battles. ... You caused damage to Israel. ... You’re too negative. ... You create too

much antagonism.”

The Israel lobby, after Rabin’s assassination in 1995 by a right-wing Jewish fanatic and the 1996 electoral victory by Likud under the leadership of Netanyahu, returned to the good graces of the Israeli government. The lobby, as Israel has lurched further and further to the right and adopted ever more overtly racist policies toward the Palestinians under Netanyahu, has become more intrusive in American political life. Israel’s apartheid state, racism and murderous assaults on unarmed Palestinians increasingly alienate many of its traditional supporters, including young American Jews. Israel, unable to justify its human rights abuses and atrocities, has opted for harsher forms of control including censoring, spying on and attacking its critics. It has pressured the U.S. State Department to redefine anti-Semitism under a three-point test known as the Three Ds: the making of statements that “demonize” Israel; statements that apply “double standards” for Israel; statements that “delegitimize” the state of Israel. This definition is being pushed by the Israel lobby in state legislatures and on college campuses. It spreads the hate talk of Islamophobia, including by sponsoring the showing of the racist film “Unmasked Judeophobia” on college campuses on Holocaust Remembrance Day. The film argues that Muslims embrace a Nazi-like anti-Semitism and are seeking to carry out another holocaust against Jews. Nearly all American Muslims targeted by law enforcement since 9/11 were singled out for their outspokenness about Palestinian rights. Most of those arrested had no connection to al-Qaida, Hatem Bazian, lecturer in the department of Near Eastern studies at UC Berkeley, says in the film—“no relationship whatsoever to what is called transnational terrorism.”

There are fractures in the Democratic Party, evidenced when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi faced a revolt by younger, more progressive members of the House over her proposal to pass an anti-Semitism resolution pushed by the Israel lobby and designed to shame Rep. Omar. A reworded resolution, one that did not please the lobby, was passed, condemning anti-Muslim bias and white supremacy and citing “African-Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, immigrants and others” victimized by bigotry.

Israel’s dominance of the Democratic Party is eroding. It is losing legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Israel’s tactics, for this reason, will become more vicious and underhanded. Its interference in the democratic process will be characterized less by an attempt to persuade and more by the use of money to ensure fealty to its policies, censorship, the enforcement of legally binding oaths in favor of Israel to blunt the BDS movement, and the kind of racist hate talk it unleashed against Rep. Omar. The lobby, as Rabin understood, was never a true friend of Israel.

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